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ABSTRACT

When parents develop negative attitudes towards new practices, powerful resistance may develop and new instructional practices may disappear. This paper examines: (1) how parental attitudes towards new classroom instructional practices influence the introduction and continuation of these practices in a school; (2) the impact of the widening gap between what parents and educators think goes on in "good" secondary school classrooms; and (3) the dilemmas faced by school leaders as they attempt to move towards common ground about what goes on in "good" secondary schools classrooms. Parents' indirect influence through self-censorship and their direct influence through active resistance are examined through case studies of math and social studies curriculum changes in a small town in New Hampshire. The math teachers ignored parental concerns, and though eventually changes were made, parents and educators were left with bad feelings and mistrust toward each other. While the social studies teachers were more proactive in addressing parents' concerns by making modifications based on perceptions of what would be acceptable to those with the most influence in the community, the concerns of those with the least influence were ignored. Study findings suggested that parents should be invited to learn with educators as new programs are considered. (Contains 25 references.) (ND)

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ED 407 399

Attitudes: How Parental Attitudes May Influence Classroom Instructional Practices

Paper Presented
as part of the symposium:

"What is the Likely Impact of Parental Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge on Changing Instructional practices in the Secondary School"

at the
1997 Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

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Introduction

Of the many reasons why past efforts to reform instructional practices have failed, one of the least explored is the lack of parental understanding of and support for the new practices. Instead of support, parents have in many instances developed negative attitudes towards these new practices. When parents develop negative attitudes towards new practices--especially when these parents are influential--powerful resistance may develop and new instructional practices may disappear. While reformers currently, as well as throughout the century, have called for parents to play a variety of roles in school reform efforts in part in order to encourage parental support, the literature speaks mostly of the difficulty of attaining this support and of one role played by parents--that of inhibiting change (Gold and Miles, 1981; Hampel, 1982).

Under differing circumstances Fullan with Steigelbauer (1991) argue that parents will either advocate for change (especially where schools are failing, such as in our inner cities), oppose changes in traditional schooling practices (especially in upper middle class communities, where the schools have served the children of the elite well) or, what happens in most cases, passively accept the changes. Rarely do they actively participate with educators in change efforts. While Fullan with Steigelbauer, (1991) argue that the prevailing attitude is one of apathy, they note that where opposition is mounted, it almost always succeeds in killing the reform. They further suggest that middle and upper-class communities are more able to effectively mount opposition to a reform. Recently, negative parental attitudes towards outcome-based education, whole language reading programs, multicultural education and other programs with impact on classroom instructional practices have played a major role in either eliminating or modifying these practices in local schools (See for example: Farkas, 1993; Gold & Miles, 1981; Moffett, 1988; Olson, 1993; Pipho, 1994; Portner, 1995; Seif, 1994).

I recently completed a study which examined parent/school relationships in the context of a reforming secondary school. I re-presented my learnings from that study in the form of two readers theater scripts. Now, in this paper and in two additional papers being presented at this year's AERA Annual Meeting, I take a closer look at three of the themes to emerge from those scripts: how parental attitudes towards new classroom instructional practices influence whether or not these practices are introduced and ultimately rooted in a school, the impact of the widening gap between what parents and educators think goes on in "good" secondary school classrooms (Konzal, 1997a) and the dilemmas faced by school leaders as they attempt to move towards common ground about what goes on in "good" secondary schools and classrooms (Konzal, 1997b).

How Parental Attitudes Influence Instructional Practices

It seems that parents' attitudes towards instructional practices are influenced by their internalized--and sometimes unarticulated--images of what goes on in "good" classrooms and schools--their mental models (Senge, 1990), by what they know about these practices and how they interpret the impact these practices will have on their children's future (Shufro, 1995), and by their beliefs (Dodd, 1994). Parents develop negative attitudes towards changes in a secondary school's teaching and learning practices, in many cases, because the changed practices as they understand them diverge from their beliefs and internal images, and because from their perspective, the practices threaten to endanger their children's future. In this paper I will focus primarily on how parents' mental models of "good" secondary schools and classrooms influence their attitudes towards new instructional practices and how these attitudes, directly or indirectly, influence whether or not new practices are introduced and ultimately become rooted in secondary schools.

Mental Models

Based on their own experiences with schooling, with their children's experiences, and on their aspirations for their children, parents internalize notions of what goes on in "good" secondary schools (Dodd, 1994). Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), argues that individuals in an organization each bring their own "mental models" about a concept or a word to a discussion, that these "mental models" may differ considerably based on past experiences, and that these images influence the attitudes people form and the actions they decide to take. Another way of thinking about these "mental models" is that they create internal scripts that we unconsciously enact.

Sometimes attitudes are formed when a parent says "I will never support a practice that puts my child through what I went through." Such is the case of one parent I interviewed who attended a one-room schoolhouse. It was a terrible experience for him:

> But down in the lower grades, and again I'm conservative, but I really don't like the idea of combining one, two, and three....Maybe that's because, you know, I was in a one room schoolhouse. That shows how old I am. But, I was in the one-room schoolhouse...until third grade. And I can remember back being a third grader, well [my teacher] says I have to do this for an hour. While I'm doing this she's dealing with a first grader or second grader or other kids. I just have a hard time comprehending that as an advantage to have two or three different grades at one time. Basically the teacher would give an assignment to the third grade and the second grade and work with the first grade. There was a designated time, you know, like this half hour was for them, this half hour, she might combine the math to all three grades. But what good would it do to have a third grader learning how to add one plus one. The third grader was trying to multiply 9 times 18, something like that. That's where I just feel, if a child is in the third grade--not all third graders are the same, so how can you have 7 third graders that vary in ability and then have 7 second graders who vary in ability and then have 7 first graders. I mean, you've got 21 kids. You could have 10 different levels of learning amongst those 21 kids, and I think if you have 15 or 18 third graders whatever the class sizes, you're only going to have two or three levels of

> learning, you're not going to have more than that. And for the teachers, it's got to be very difficult.

This parent equated the school district's attempt to initiate multi-age classrooms with his experience with one-room schoolhouses and therefore developed negative attitudes towards this new practice.

On the other hand, another parent fondly remembered an experience he had with a one-room schoolhouse when he was a child and therefore developed positive attitudes towards the new practice of multi-age groupings:

> Well I think one of the finest things about the one room schoolhouse was the fact that the older kids helped the younger kids and there was a togetherness...which is not a school competitiveness but there is a togetherness, and they're all one big family. So the older kids help the younger kids and I think that children learn to read a lot faster in that kind of concept, because then you have kids that know the words teaching the younger kids the words and teaching them how to sound out the sounds. In a one-room schoolhouse, the teacher couldn't teach everything. The teacher had maybe 15 minutes for each class....and [to] teach everybody something relevant was a real art. And those kind of teachers were real teachers and...would make the best master teachers today if they were still around, there are not too many of them around. But teaching, I think its wonderful. I fairly enjoyed school when I was teaching somebody else how to do something, cause I knew, because it helped me learn too. So nothing stopped me from learning. Nothing would stop a person who wants to inquire, learn, to continue learning in that kind of environment.

Once parents develop attitudes about new practices--whether positive or negative--these attitudes can play a role in determining whether or not these practices will be introduced and/or maintained in schools in both direct ways and indirect ways. Indirectly, they influence which practices will be introduced and maintained when educators self-censor the practices they are willing to introduce because they can predict which practices parents'--especially influential parents--might view positively or negatively (Spring, 1993). And directly, they can influence which practices will be introduced and maintained by making their voices heard loud and clearly--by banding together with other parents and rising up against practices which either are in conflict with their mental models of "good" practices or which conform to their mental models but which are (in their eyes) poorly planned and implemented (Fullan with Steigelbauer, 1991).

Indirect Influence: Self-Censorship

Schools are free to introduce new practices in their classrooms as long as they don't violate parents' mental models about what should go on in "good" schools and classrooms. Boyd (1976; 1982) refers to this area of permissible practice as "zones of tolerance." Once schools push against the boundaries of theses zones parents resist. Now certainly parents don't all speak with one voice and have many different mental models as was illustrated above. So who's mental models do schools pay attention to? They pay particular attention to parents who know how to influence the system (Lareau, 1989, Spring, 1993). Parents with influence in schools--with cultural capital (see page 13 for more on this)--are typically those who have been successful in school themselves,

have more than a high school education and who are in occupations with status--primarily the professions (Lareau, 1989, p.119).

Because school boards and educators are acutely aware of what classroom practices fall within these influential parents' zones of tolerance (Boyd, 1976; 1982) and which practices will raise questions, they have in many cases self-censored their willingness to introduce practices which push against parents' expectations. In many cases educators are hired based on their willingness to act within the bounds of these zones. For instance, in the following selection from Alan Peshkin's classic, *Growing Up American: Schooling and the Survival of Community* (1978), he describes how one school board carefully selected a school superintendent who reflected the values of the community and who, therefore, preferred to hire teachers who were local in order to assure that teaching practices would conform to local values and expectations:

> ...the farmers who dominate the school board have deep roots in Mansfield's past. Sensitive to their role as community guardians, they take account of the impact their decisions have on community well-being. They are appropriate agents for the mainstream Mansfield orientation. For example, the school board rejected an admittedly bright, energetic candidate for school superintendent because his "city" ideas would not suit Mansfield. Instead they selected a man whose views and values appeared to be reassuringly compatible with their own about how to work, spend money, respond to innovation and discipline students. The board members felt so good about their choice that they described him in the most flattering way they knew--he was "country". (p.197)

Direct Influence: Active Resistance

When schools are bold enough (or naive enough) to introduce practices which push against the edges of influential parents' zones of tolerance, active resistance can result. In these cases parents either advocate for their own child, by demanding that they be removed from the program or given an alternative or band together and, using their knowledge about how schools operate, bring pressure on the administration through the school board to rescind the changes (Fullan with Steigelbauer, 1991).

In the case study which I conducted in a reforming secondary school in a small New England town, new teaching and learning practices were introduced which pushed beyond many parents' expectations for what should go on in "good" classrooms. In this case there were instances of self-censorship, as well as active parental resistance. In this paper I will examine two major changes implemented in this school (the change in the math curriculum and the change in the social studies curriculum), discuss the attitudes held by parents about these practices, uncover the mental models held by parents about "good" practices which influenced their attitudes, and discuss the impact of the attitudes on classroom instructional practices.

The Study

This paper is based on an arts-based qualitative inquiry conducted in the Fall of 1994. It is arts-based in the sense that I use Elliot Eisner's work on educational criticism as a guide (Eisner, 1991). Eisner offers art criticism as a model for educational researchers and suggests that educational critics follow the model by first appreciating (coming to know well the phenomenon under study by attending carefully to its specific details and characteristics) the phenomena and then making public what one has learned. He challenges researchers to experiment with a variety of forms as they make public their learnings (Eisner, 1993, 1995).

Following this model, I gained a deep appreciation for what was happening in the school I was studying by using a variety of approaches. I spent three two-week sessions on site. During that time in order to gain an appreciation for the educators' points of view concerning parental attitudes about changing teaching and learning practices I conducted a survey of the entire faculty; I interviewed 21 teachers and administrators, many of whom were actively involved in the school's reform work since its inception; I attended faculty meetings and meetings of planning committees; and I reviewed archival documents related to their reform efforts over the past ten years. In order to understand parental perspectives about these changes I conducted a telephone survey of randomly selected parents (43% responded) of the current twelfth graders (students who were the first to fully experience the two curricula changes I was investigating--math and social studies); I interviewed 38 parents, most of whom had twelfth grade children, but also included some parents of children in other grades due to the difficulty I had in finding enough twelfth grade parents who were willing to talk to me more in depth; I attended meetings of parents; and I reviewed archival documents which included letters from parents concerning past reform efforts.

As I read and reread the transcripts of my interviews of the parents and educators whom I interviewed, it became increasingly clear to me that many times parents and educators speak to each other at cross purposes--neither hearing nor understanding what the other says. It occurred to me that a provocative way of re-presenting what I was finding would be to create dialogue pieces which demonstrated how parents and educators talked without communicating. In the end I went one step further. Taking up the challenge from Eisner (1993) to consider alternative forms of re-presentation, I decided to re-present my findings in the form of two readers theater scripts. I did this for two reasons. The first is that the data I collected seemed to cry out for a form other than the traditional narrative report. And secondly, in thinking about the audience I most wanted to reach--practitioners and parents--it seemed as though readers theater scripts would be more compelling and would have a better chance of inviting parents and practitioners into a dialogue with each other about "good" teaching and learning practices.

This paper builds on that first attempt at re-presenting my findings. This time, writing in narrative form rather than script form, I attempt to push my interpretations beyond the original

ones, examining more deeply some of the findings I alluded to in the scripts, but which I could not elaborate on because of the limitations of the readers theater genre.

The Setting

The Town

Grover's Corners[1] is a town in transition--a New England town of 11,856 residents trying to hold on to the strengths of its past as it moves into the future. For five years (1983-1988) I lived in the town just west of Grover's Corners and had to drive through town to get to the nearby metropolitan area. Grover's Corners is home to one of the campuses of the state university, originally a two-year normal school for training teachers. When I relocated to this area I expected to find an ambiance, a quality of life, that reflected the university campus in town. I expected to find interesting little cafes, bookstores, and maybe even an organic foods market. But I didn't. Instead I found a town much like any other small New England town. The main street boasted a pizza restaurant, a sub shop, a convenience store and a flea market at one end of town and a supermarket, drug store, and Grover's Corners five and dime at the other end. Scattered along the main street were also a couple of hairdressers, insurance companies, banks and the post office. Nothing on the main street would tell a passer-by that there was a university campus in town.

When I recently drove through town I was struck by the ambivalence with which the town struggles today. Much remains as it was when I lived nearby. Many of the stores remain the same, but there have been some additions. A Burger King has opened in town, as has a Subway shop. New restaurants with a decidedly 'yuppie' flavor have infiltrated the town, as has a whole foods market and a book store. These businesses are run by and cater to the "people from away"[2] who have peopled the town more and more during the past fifteen years. Living in new developments carved out of the rich farmland with magnificent vistas of rolling hillsides, these new people have brought new values and demands to the town. On the other hand, the old houses that line the main streets, the farm stands, the greenhouses, the saw mills, the gravel pits and farms grasp at the great agricultural past. Grover's Corners was the last of the towns in Newland county to hold on to its agricultural base. More operating farms were located in Grover's Corners than in any other town late into the 80s.

Disquieting images of this transition are impressed on my mind's eye--the lines of beautiful old homes distorted by modern awnings displaying the names of a Chinese take-out restaurant or a

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[1] With much humility and with apologies to Thornton Wilder (1938), I borrowed his town, Grover's Corners, as a setting for the readers theater scripts I first wrote. The town we find ourselves in today is rooted in memories of life in small town New England and is reminiscent of the Grover's Corners, created by Wilder. *Our Town* casts a nostalgic shadow of life as it was on the Grover's Corners of today.

[2] The term "from away" is used in some New England states to refer to those not born in the state.

Subway shop--an old weathered farmer slowly driving his tractor down Main Street during the nightly rush hour followed by a stream of disgruntled drivers in a hurry to get home.

Negotiating the marriage between the "old Grover's Corners' people" and the "new Grover's Corners' people" has not been easy. Debates rage about how to maintain the small town flavor of the village as commuters from outlying communities travel through the town's major crossroad to get to the nearby metropolitan center. Shrinking state revenues and increased taxes due to property reevaluation put citizens in a quandary. They need more economic development but they don't want the development to spoil their small town environment. New housing developments have brought in more young families who want more and more services but yet want to preserve the bucolic quality of life which drew them to Grover's Corners in the first place. The school population is growing--requiring more staff--but the taxes raised by the new homes don't cover the costs of the increased population. The townspeople have voted to recall the budget for the last two years believing that the town council was not prudent enough and demanded more budget cuts. Longtime landholders in town who were feeling the pressure of higher taxes are forced to sell off acreage to developers. One farmer said to me "These newcomers move into town for 7 years, raise our taxes, and then move on. And we're stuck with the higher taxes".

This tension also plays out in the struggle between the town council and the school board. Those with influence on the town council are longtime landowners--mainly farmers--some of whom are struggling to maintain their family farms and others of whom operate construction companies and gravel pits. They are conservative in the sense that they want to maintain the town as it remains in their memories. Some of the parents I interviewed (Mrs. Reidy[3] and Mr. and Mrs. MacFarland) represent this group. On the other hand, those with influence on the School Board are either newcomers or older families who have higher education and who see themselves as "forward thinking." The Ortons are representative of this group. Some say that the dynamic tension has been healthy and has forced the town to respect the old while trying to accommodate the new. Others are not so sure it has been a positive experience.

The District

Since 1983 the district has had two superintendents who are recognized for their skilled leadership of the change efforts. As one teacher said "Grover's Corners has been blessed to have a couple of superintendents who not only stay on top of [the changes] and are articulate and are in favor of [them]...they [also] try to educate [the public] about what's going on and I think that's very important as well".

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[3]. All names of parents and educators are pseudonyms. Identifying characteristics have been changed to protect anonymity.

From 1983 through 1990 the district was led by a superintendent who believed that raising the voice of teachers was important and encouraged teachers to be reflective of their practice and to take risks in their classrooms. The superintendent who followed her in 1990 continued and expanded upon her emphasis on teacher leadership and began to bring together the disparate teacher initiated change efforts into a more systemic district-wide effort. In reflecting on this the current superintendent says:

> ...it was teacher voice, it was respect of teachers, it was a sense that teachers can make decisions, they can be trusted to make decisions.... I heard that over and over again. It wasn't hard to synthesize that. That was a key cornerstone of what [she] had brought to this organization. She'd never say this but those were radical ideas in 1983 when supply closets were locked up. You were not allowed to go into supply closets unless you asked the principal to go in and get some construction paper. Think about it for a minute....we've built upon that both because we believe in it, but [also] because of the need for capacity. In order to change, in order to have capacity and adjust and improve and to grow as an organization and as individuals, we've taken teacher voice and teacher decision making [and moved] towards teacher leadership. [We've] really stretched that work in a number of directions that I'm very proud of.

Five years ago, in 1992 the district was chosen to be a pilot site for one of the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) design teams--the National Restructuring Project (NRP).[4] While the district had initiated district-wide strategic planning in 1990 with the arrival of the new superintendent, the NRP galvanized the district's efforts to develop a system-wide plan to create a results oriented educational program for all students. Not all teachers received this opportunity with open arms. As one teacher said to me "Imagine this, the first day the NRP staff arrived in a squad of Volvos with out-of-state license plates. They don't live here, what in the world do they know about us?". Others, however, saw this as an opportunity to bring together all of what they had been working for individually and in small groups for the last ten years. Teachers became active leaders of the project as a result of the superintendent's commitment to developing teacher leadership. Site developers were chosen, design teams were formed, School Planning and Management Teams were formed at each school consisting of teachers, parents, administrators, and students; teachers, parents, and students attended summer institutes, conferences and meetings with the other pilot sites. A very busy and exhausting three years ensued. In the fall of 1994 they were in the last year of their three year funding cycle and were in the process of making plans for the future. Explorations were under way for "scaling up" by building alliances with other school districts in their region.

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[4] A pseudonym

The School

The high school reflects the town's struggle between the values of the old and new residents. In 1992 the town voted support for a bond issue for a ten million dollar building addition to the high school. This, during a time when the state economy was weak and state aid stagnant. In fact, the following summer the town voted to recall the town and school budget. Why then did the town vote to totally renovate the building and add a large new addition onto the old building? One explanation given by both educators and parents is that it passed because both the old Grover's Corners people and the new Grover's Corners people could see their values embodied in this new building (even though there is still nostalgia for the old building among some parents and faculty). Old Grover's Corners' people pride themselves in caring about their young people and recognized that the old building was totally inadequate. Additionally, deeply rooted in this town (as in many rural communities) is a strong support for sports activities. The new building would boast a new gymnasium and outdoor track facility. The sports booster clubs were active supporters of the bond issue. New Grover's Corners people, more typically those who were living in the new homes built on the edge of town supported the bond issue because they were looking for educational facilities which more closely matched their mental images of educational facilities that they experienced in the towns from which they came.

When I visited the school in the Fall of 1994 the new addition was nearing completion and the renovations to the old part of the building were not far behind. While the building satisfied both new and old Grover's Corners residents' visions, the uneasy marriage of the old and the new is inherent in the new building. Clearly the new dominates. In fact when finished, I'm not sure if much of the old building will be recognizable. The new section was completed first, and the old section last. A textual reading of this might be that by saving the old for last, they were able to hold onto the old for a little longer--to give comfort, perhaps. Certainly the parents of today's students find it comforting to use the old part of the building as compass points to hold onto as they try to navigate the new part of the building. "I can't find my way around anymore." lamented one parent. Indeed, one longtime faculty member reflected that "The new building has definitely made it harder for me because I don't see a lot of the people I used to see. Now you have to seek somebody out and I really don't like that. I just think the place is so darn big that it is not the same school it used to be".

While the new high school addition is an example of how both the old and the new values were accommodated, the changes going on within the walls of the school, continue to test this uneasy marriage of values for both faculty and parents. Struggling to adapt curriculum, teaching strategies, and school structures to the realities of the nineties and beyond there is a struggle going on to recreate the heart and soul of the school--to understand what of the old ways should be maintained and what should be replaced. Many new approaches have found their way into the

high school--but not without much debate and frustration. This school has been at this business of change for many years. The struggle for consensus among faculty members has been difficult. The struggle for consensus among parents and between parents and educators has just begun.

The Parents

Even though on the surface this community looks homogenous--and it is in terms of ethnic and religious diversity since well over ninety percent of parents represent a European American heritage and probably almost the same percentage represent a Christian perspective--parents in this community differ in important ways. They differ in where they were born and raised, in their educational attainment and in the status of their occupations. Using a purposive sampling strategy I attempted to interview parents who represented this diversity. The following chart represents the degree to which I was able to do this:

	Farmer	Small Business Owner	Low Skilled Trade	High Skilled Trade	Office Worker	Middle Mgr.	Professional Educator	Other Professional	Consultant	Home Maker/ School Volunteer	Total
Born in Town	2	2	3	4	2	0	1	3	0	3	20
Born in State	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	1	0	0	6
From Away	0	2	0	0	0	1	4	0	3	2	12
Total	2	4	3	4	3	3	7	4	3	5	38

Table 1
Parent Occupations

As I described earlier, one of the tensions in this town is between parents "from away"--with their different values, experiences and expectations--and parents born and educated in the state and in Grover's Corners. This is one of the differences that stood out for me with the parents who I interviewed. Let me introduce you to a few of these parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Amberson lived in a lovely old restored farmhouse and used the large acreage to raise sheep. Mr. Amberson is a college-educated self-employed business consultant and Mrs. Amberson is a teacher in a near-by community with a masters degree from a prestigious college. Both were raised and went to school in another eastern state. Both experienced progressive educational practices as children, remembered them fondly, and expect the same for their children:

Mrs. Amberson: I teach in a near-by town. My high school experience was unbelievable. I went to this very, very progressive high school--probably more modern than Grover's Corners is at this point--it was known as the "Country Club." It had just a fabulous music program and an art program. I had extra time in my day added to the beginning and to the end so I could fit in extra courses. But for the kids who weren't interested in school they could get out at 1:00 and go to work.

When I came up here and saw what they had here and heard people say "What was good enough for us back then is good enough for our kids now," I thought, "Well, gee, it wasn't like that for me!" And so I like seeing them become more progressive. I feel like we're becoming part of the world rather than this little closed community. I think people are more interested in Grover's Corners because of the schools. They've become very well known and people are moving to this community because of it. I'm real happy about that.

Mr. Amberson: There was one teacher there who was very progressive. She taught a class called Projects. It was an independent study. We could study anything we wanted to. "What do you want to study?" she'd ask. So all year, the whole semester, I researched a topic and I had to make presentations every week on my progress. See, I was under the gun. Every single week...once a week and we just talked. I think twice or three times, we had to show our paper and how far we had gotten. There were ten kids in the class and every week, five kids spoke for eight or ten minutes on their projects. We were under the gun, so we read, read, read, and made a presentation, a good presentation.

Mrs. Jefferson was raised and went to school in another part of the state. She went to college against the will of her father, got married and divorced, and now lives in a trailer home and supports her daughter while working as an office manager. She's determined that nothing will stand in the way of her daughter's college education.

Mrs. Jefferson: The school experience, as a whole, has been very positive. My worries come into what happens when *my daughter* gets out. We don't know the answers to that yet. I just want to make sure that no doors have been closed for her. We won't know for sure until after she gets out and gets into school and see what happens at that time. Hopefully if the colleges will go ahead and accept the new math curriculum--I don't know--you know, some of my friends who have children that have either graduated or are ahead of Marcia, they are saying, "Oh, don't worry about it." Well I do worry about it because Marcia's class is the first class that's going to go through Math 1, 2, 3, and 4. I don't know what is going to happen to *my daughter.*

Mrs. Gleason was born and raised in Grover's Corners, struggled economically, did not excel in school, and is determined that her children will be respected and get a better education than both she and her husband got. Mrs. Gleason works in an office and her husband is a construction worker. She lives in a small home that she and her husband made over from what she said was no more that a shack when they bought it. She noted that its location at the bottom of a hill and surrounded by new homes built by people from away was indicative of her status in this community. Both of her sons struggle in school and receive special education services.

> **Mrs. Gleason:** I came from less money, what I have is mine. I work for it and I'm proud of it. I tell the boys that. I come from a family of six kids on welfare. I had four sisters, and all five of us slept in one bedroom. I'm not going to let nobody downgrade my two kids.
>
> My husband dropped out of school. I don't think the teachers cared because he used to sleep in class and they'd wake him up when the class was over. I blame his mother too because she wouldn't push him to go in. But he wants his boys to get a good education. We're not going to let nobody downgrade our kids.

Now surely not all of the parents I interviewed who came from away were professionals with progressive educational experiences as were the Ambersons; nor were all of the parents who came from the state conservative in their outlook about new practices as was Mrs. Jefferson; nor were all of the parents who came from the town poor and experienced difficulty in school as did Mrs. Gleason. But these themes did run through a good many of the interviews I conducted and stood out as being representative of many parents who were born and raised away, in state, and in town.

Also running through the transcripts of those I interviewed were differences related to the way parents thought they could influence the schools. Parents like Mr. and Mrs. Amberson had clear information and understandings about changes being made in the school's classroom practices and they had no doubt that they could influence the schools for the benefit of their children. Parents like Mrs. Jefferson knew about the changes but were frustrated in their attempts to effect change for their children. And parents like Mrs. Gleason knew little of the changes which were proposed and had little confidence in their ability to effect change for their children. Lareau (1989) describes these differences in terms of cultural capital. She used Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital"--access to knowledge and skills which can be used to navigate the school culture--to explain different patterns of parental involvement and intervention in schools (Lareau, 1989). I borrow her interpretation of "cultural capital" to explain why different parents had different degrees of influence on school practices in Grover's Corners High School.

Lareau's (1989) interpretation argues that the amount of "cultural capital" a parent has is influenced by parental educational competence, occupational status, confidence in their abilities, relationship to work, and access to networks and information (p. 119). The parents whom I met in Grover's Corners who, for the most part, are able to influence the schools, parents like Mr. and Mrs. Amberson generally have these attributes. Parents, who for the most part, are not able to influence the schools for the benefit of their children--like Mrs. Gleason--generally do not have these attributes.

Direct/Indirect Influence

Parents complain that many times they raise their voices, but are not heard (Fine, 1993). However, in the following two stories--some parents' voices were heard--in one case (math) the school changed practices to address their concerns and in the other case--the social studies curriculum--while parent concerns were not addressed directly, educators designed the program in ways which they thought would be congruent with parents mental models in order to avoid parental opposition. So, in both cases some parents' concerns were attended to--directly in one case (math) and indirectly in the other (social studies). It is also true, however, that some parents voices were not heard. Those parents who lacked the "cultural capital" which might afford them status in the eyes of the educators and therefore give them access were not heard.

The Math Story: Direct Influence

Imagine this scene, it is a spring evening in 1990 and the Grover's Corners High School auditorium is packed with parents eager to hear about the program their children will have when they enter high school in the coming fall. Standing in front of the auditorium are the two freshman math teachers. They are in the midst of describing the new math curriculum which will be introduced in the fall:

> The new math curriculum will take all of the various disciplines of secondary mathematics--algebra, geometry, probability, statistics, calculus, topology--and weave them throughout the mathematics curriculum...Math 1 replaces Algebra I, Basic Math and Consumer Math; Math 2 replaces Geometry, Math 3 and 3A replaces Algebra II and Math 4 replaces College Review Math...Precalculus and Calculus will still be offered. The course that all of your children will take as entering freshman--Math 1--was designed by asking the following question: 'If students could take only one year of high school mathematics, what would be most important for them to know and be able to do?' The curriculum consists of five interrelated units. Each has identified core skills and concepts. These core skills build on and extend previous knowledge from the K-8 curriculum . There will no longer be some children taking consumer math and some children taking Algebra. They will all be taking the same math. We will have high expectations for all of our students.

There was silence, the audience was stunned. Parents were faced with a math curriculum which challenged many of their understandings--mental models--of what should go on in "good" math classes. Parents' mental models--based on their own experiences--told them that "good" math classrooms were ones which were ability grouped, which followed a traditional sequence (Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, etc.) and which was labeled accordingly. Labels such as Math 1 and Math 2 sounded like a less rigorous curriculum. And then the stunned silence was broken and the questions began: "What do you mean my child won't be taking Algebra I?" "What do you mean <u>everybody</u> will be taking the same math? What about my child who is good in math and needs advanced math? What about my child who has difficulty with math and needs extra help? What will colleges think about Math 1, 2, 3, and 4 when they see that on the transcript instead of

Algebra, Geometry, and so on? How are you going to teach very good math students and students who struggle with math in the same class?" The questions came fast and furiously and the teachers were unable to answer the questions to the parents' satisfaction. Most everyone I spoke with who was at this meeting remembers it as the beginning of a long and tortured process of negotiation between parents and educators which after three years finally resulted in a modified curriculum which all--parents (at least those who know about the modifications) and teachers alike--agree is a better model than the one which was first proposed.

To this day, however, while some parents whose children were students during the first three years this program was implemented expressed satisfaction with the program because their children did well in it

> **Mrs. Rosen:** In the beginning [we were concerned], my husband attended almost every meeting. [But] Actually my son improved, believe it or not, it gave him enough confidence to realize he's capable of doing [math]."

many more parents expressed deep anger at the program and its impact on their children. And, in addition, most of these parents were not aware of the modifications that had been made--that in fact their anger and concerns had been heard and addressed.

There were two issues that most violated parents' mental models and most concerned the parents--the move away from ability grouping and the renaming of the courses. Parents feared that heterogeneous grouping would mean that children who were strong math students would not be challenged, that they would have to wait for the students who struggled to catch up, and therefore they would be slowed down. This was a concern expressed in the very first meeting and it was one which continued throughout the long period of discontent. And it is one that parents talked about when describing their children's experiences in these classes:

> **Mr. Ballard**: I've told my son all his life, when you get to high school they'll have different levels of math that you can take and you'll be in with a bunch of kids of your own ability and you'll be able to go. And he got to high school and math and--NO--there's just one Math 1 for every single kid in that high school and a Math 2 for every single kid in the high school. And it's just knocked the stuffing right out of him. He just wants to graduate and that's it. He was totally turned off. If he had been brought in his freshman year and had got in with a grade level of students of his own ability I'm sure he'd go right on. But after two years of just sitting there with every single kid in the high school in your class, every grade...he just gave up.

> **Mrs. Lacey**: My finding with our son was he always got in with a group that seemed to be covering the same things semester after semester after semester and he was bored. We found that students that understood it weren't able to move on because there were so many students who didn't understand. And therefore, class time was taken to go over it once again and the other ones who did understand the concept got bored. and especially about the heterogeneous grouping abounded. These questions continued to be raised throughout the years.

The second issue, that of moving from a traditional course sequence with familiar sounding course titles to an integrated spiraling curriculum with unfamiliar course titles was also explosive. For the most part parents saw this as a threat to their children's future. How would colleges view this change? Would they understand it? Would they accept it? Once children reach high school, uppermost in many parents' minds is positioning their children so that they can get into the college of their choice. Parents feared that this change would put their children's future in jeopardy. Mrs. Jefferson's story exemplifies this fear. When Mrs. Jefferson saw that the names of the courses were changed from Algebra I to Math I she became very concerned. She had to fight for her own college education and she was determined that nothing would get in the way of her daughter's college education:

> **Mrs. Jefferson:** I went to high school up north. I loved it. My father didn't want me to go to college, he didn't see the point in us going to college. So I had to work to put myself through. It wasn't easy but it was important to me so I did. None of my brothers or sisters did. That's why it's so important for me to make sure that nothing gets in the way of my daughter's getting a college education.
>
> The math scares me. The school math concept of Math 1, 2, 3, and 4 absolutely scares me to death and I guess Marcia's class is going to be the first class that has graduated with the whole Math 1, 2, 3, and 4. I just don't know. Going back to when I was in school you really had to conquer Algebra 1, Algebra 2 and each one was a building block onto the next. How they can group them together and expand on that is just beyond me. I can't believe it. Also, I don't know how colleges are going to look at Math 1, 2, 3, and 4 and say, "Oh, okay." That scares me.

Because of her own struggle to get a college education, Mrs. Jefferson was determined that nothing would get in the way of her daughter's chance at a college education. Changing the nature of the math curriculum and the names of the courses was threatening to Mrs. Jefferson because of her fear that the new courses might not prepare her daughter for college and because colleges might not understand what was taught in courses labeled Math 1 and Math 2. Therefore, Mrs. Jefferson's mental model about math classes which would serve her daughter's needs did not include an integrated spiraling curriculum, instead it was rooted in a traditional sequence of courses with traditional course names.

As Meyers and Rowan (1978) have argued, when schools change the routines and rituals of schools--or change what is embedded in parents' mental models of what should go on in "good" schools and classrooms--parents then become alarmed and begin to question what goes on behind the closed doors of classrooms. And such was the case here, too. Once the rituals and routines of ability grouping and course names were violated--classroom practices became open to critique. One of the major changes in this new curriculum was a move towards cooperative work groups. Many of the parents I spoke with were critical of this practice. While some criticized it because they believed strongly that students should work independently:

Mrs. MacFarland: I had a problem with it when they had three and four kids in a work study group in the classroom and they always put one of the smarter kids with the lesser kids, which is all right, but that is slowing my daughter down. She used to complain about that. She used to come home and say, "Geez, I couldn't get all my work done because I was helping so and so." "Geez, you should be doing your own work first and then helping." And it seemed like that is what the teacher should have been doing.

Mr. Stanford: My son's a straight A student, but he's not as advanced as my daughter was because, well for one reason, the way they group the students--cooperative learning--why the value of that still exists, I don't know.

others saw it as a good idea, but poorly implemented:

Mrs. Mackintosh: I like the theory very much, I have nothing against that theory....I think part of the problem that I saw and my daughter saw was that I don't believe the teachers had enough training on the group dynamic piece. There was a lot of issues with dysfunctional groups...and in the process my daughter who has a math aptitude has just written math off...the struggling in the groups, that's what she attributes it to.

The few parents who thought that cooperative group work was a good idea tended to be those parents who had themselves struggled in school. They saw advantages to students helping each other with work. Listen, for instance, to Mrs.Reidy:

I think if I was going to try to figure something out with my pals as opposed to having a teacher try to teach it--sometimes you get kids that are more on your level...maybe another kid can come up with just such a simple way to show you how to do something that you would remember how to do it.

While concerns about the new math curriculum buzzed around certain segments of the community, became the subject of conversation at week-end cocktail parties, and continued to fester with many parents for over three years, there were a group of parents who were uninformed and uninvolved in this brouhaha. In the group of parents I interviewed, I found that it was the parents who had less status in the community--who didn't socialize with those with more status--who knew little about the new math curriculum and the concerns expressed by other parents. Of the thirty-eight parents I interviewed, thirteen didn't know about the changes. Almost all of these parents were parents who were born and raised in the town (11), had low status jobs (11), and no education beyond high school (8). In other words, these were parents who lacked the "cultural capital" which would give them the ability and the status necessary to interact with school people on an equal basis. These were the parents whose voices were not heard, the parents to whom the school would not be forced to listen.

In the end, the school listened to those parents with influence--they modified the math curriculum and addressed other concerns. The modifications dealt with grouping students. In the original proposal students were grouped heterogeneously and teachers attempted to meet individual differences within the classroom. In the revised program, the students are still in heterogeneous

classes. However, there are some major differences. Two freshman math classes are scheduled at the same time. Each teacher starts a unit within their heterogeneously grouped classes. After a period of time, the students are tested. Those students who master the unit material are regrouped into a group that takes these concepts further. The students who have not mastered the material are regrouped into a group that gets additional instruction related to the concepts taught. One teacher works with the enrichment group and the other teacher works with those needing additional help. At the beginning of each new unit, the students goes back to their heterogeneous groups and the cycle begins all over again. This plan is based on the idea that with each new unit different students will need additional help, therefore the groups will not be static. And in fact, there are students who, for some units need additional help, and for other units, qualify for enrichment work. However, there are also those students who always need additional help and others who always qualify for enrichment.

In terms of parents' concerns about how colleges would respond to the course titles, while the school didn't change them, the school did prepare a statement which was attached to each student's transcripts which described the math program to college admissions officers.

In retrospect, while parents and educators are happy with the way the program was modified, they are not happy with the process. As I mentioned earlier, many parents whose children were in the program in the first few years were not even aware that changes were made and still harbor deep anger about the program. When told that many parents were not aware of the changes the superintendent interpreted their anger in this way:

> That's a hard one for me to understand because I can tell you that we had a number of meetings with the parents over that math issue, and we had meetings following meetings with parents where the staff and I would sit down together and we would actually make significant adjustments to the program. One of the big issues, one of the major issues that came up that led us to make some significant improvements in the program had to do with the question about those kids who could go faster. That's where the whole idea for grouping and regrouping came up--from the parent's concerns. We went back and explained that to them. And some of those people after a year and a half of that continued to say "I'm angry, you had all these meetings and you didn't change a thing." And what they were really saying was not "You didn't listen to me.", what they were really saying was "I didn't get my way, because you didn't go back, and teach Algebra I, you didn't go back to grouping and tracking."

And educators remember the struggle with anger as well. They felt that their professional judgment wasn't being respected, that they were not trusted to have the best interests of the students in mind when they developed this program. As one educator said:

> An ideal relationship between parents and teachers has to be based on some mutual respect, mutual trust--that we understand their point of view, they understand ours--that there's some trust established. Not that being skeptical is bad, but there's got to be that underlying trust that we're trying to do the best job we can do. And I think that's what makes breakdowns. It's when it appears that trust isn't there, from either side, or that we're not

> listening to them or we're not listening to their interest, that we have gotten into trouble with each other.

The Social Studies Story: Indirect Influence

It's the middle of May and there's a buzz in the air at Grover's Corners High School today. This is the first day of a week of student public policy presentations. Every junior taking the new required social studies course is anxiously awaiting their turn to present their public policy position paper. Papers dealing with gun control, abortion and local tax recall initiatives are representative of some of the papers that will be presented over the course of this week. Each student will orally present their paper to a panel of reviewers including their teacher, other teachers, parents and community members. While these public presentations are at the heart of the changes in the new curriculum, there were other changes as well. Most notably was a core curriculum of knowledge which every student was required to master at the 85% level.

The three social studies teachers responsible for this new course were leaders in the school's restructuring efforts and had born the brunt of the internal faculty struggles over the long years of debate about the form that reform would take at Grover's Corners High School. Lessons learned from that struggle, as well as lessons learned from the eruption of parental concerns about the math curriculum, caused them to think strategically about introducing their new course. Attending to parental concerns, while not the primary driving force behind how they designed the course, influenced the way they crafted this new curriculum and its instructional practices. One of the social studies teachers explained it this way:

> We have made some modifications that we felt didn't compromise the goals and objective of quality learning in ways that would not create unnecessary anxiety in parents. A specific example would be that ...parents grew up getting a test every 3 weeks on Friday or whatever. We don't go by any set schedule, we get there when we get there, but we do some core content type testing. We feel that's a confidence builder for the parents--that they know that that's a part of the curriculum and that gives them a sense of confidence that... even if there are some other things in the class that don't seem quite like the way they were when they were in school, this is one that gives us some credibility to have some freedom to do some other things. And gives them some comfort and confidence that the kids aren't just doing a completely "process oriented" or "values oriented" curriculum that's criticized as "mush" and so forth.

Aware of the boundaries of parents' (especially parents with influence) zones of tolerance, these teachers designed their new course so that it pushed at the edges of these zones without going too far and creating a storm of resistance from influential parents.

This new curriculum met with mixed reaction from parents. There was vocal opposition from some parents who complained that an 85% mastery level was too high. "The law says that 65% is passing." said one parent. But the resistance quickly disappeared. There seems to be a number of interrelated reasons for this. First, the school board was firmly and unanimously in

support of this curriculum change, unlike the math curriculum change which was heatedly debated at week-end parties frequented by board members. A second factor was that the teachers worked extraordinarily hard to assure that they kept parents informed about what was going on in the classroom and that most children were successful in the course. Teachers sent out numerous memos to parents explaining their course, keeping them informed about their progress and inviting parents to participate on the oral presentation panels. The teachers also worked hard to meet the needs of all children through extensive after-school tutoring and mentoring sessions that the students were required to attend if they did not reach the 85% mastery level on a core knowledge test. They are proud to point out that not one special education student who has followed through with the help offered has failed their course (although they neglected to remember that one student was, according to her mother, so traumatized by the course that everybody, including the teachers, agreed to have her excused from the course). The one parent who complained to the school board, rescinded that complaint, after one of the social studies teachers worked diligently with the student after school and the student did well on her tests. A third reason is that the teachers had the advantage of learning from the experience of the math program. The teachers talked about learning from the experience of the math curriculum in terms of how they presented the curriculum to parents.

Another reason may be that the influential parents of Grover's Corners saw the changes in the math curriculum more potentially threatening to their children's future than the changes in the social studies curriculum. Parents may have perceived higher standards and experience writing and presenting public policy papers as experiences that colleges would understand and value. Since parents are less willing to tamper with practices which might not be understood by college admissions offices, the changes in the math curriculum--heterogeneous grouping and changes in the course titles--were more threatening. The social studies curriculum did not tamper with these issues. Students continued to be grouped by ability and the name of the new course was not so different that it could not be understood by college admissions offices. In addition, individual work was valued over group work. The math curriculum used cooperative group work, the social studies curriculum did not. This was another change in the math curriculum which caused parents concern--caused them to feel that their children's success was threatened.

Perhaps another reason for the quick disappearance of parental resistance was that for the most part influential parents supported the changes. According to the principal and the superintendent, for the most part, parents who complained about the social studies changes were different from parents who complained about the math changes. I found this also to hold true in my interviews with parents. Most all of the parents with influence in the schools--with much cultural capital--applauded the new curriculum. They appreciated the high standards (even though a few thought the standards could be higher still). And they thought the public policy paper and

oral presentation were especially important. On the other hand parents with less influence--with less cultural capital--were those who complained. They were not as concerned about the public policy presentation (many thought it was a good idea) as much as they were concerned that the standard for passing was too high. The notion that all students could master the content at high levels was foreign to them. Embedded in their mental models was the idea that "not every kid is a B student." They didn't believe their children could reach this level and were concerned that the "expectations were too high", that "it would bring down their self-esteem to be set up for failure", and that it might "make them look foolish in their friend's eyes." Individual parents complained to the principal--but their concerns fell on deaf ears. Because there wasn't a mass movement of influential parents to exert pressure on the school board and administration, the school was free to ignore these concerns. The social studies teachers had done a good job of predicting what was needed to assure the support of influential parents and thus assure that the program would go on as planned.

In the fourth year, after three years of successful implementation of this program, the school quietly introduced another change--the classes would no longer be grouped by ability level. This did not cause the uproar that the math changes caused. Why? Perhaps it is because the program and the teachers had gained parental respect over the three years it had been implemented and parents trusted the teachers to do a good job. Perhaps, also, it is because the emphasis is still on individual achievement rather than group work. and the design of the program allows students to move forward based on their own individual achievement. One of the social studies teachers did talk about moving towards some form of group work--but only after students have demonstrated their ability to do research projects individually. Perhaps because it was introduced without much fanfare--it was quietly introduced--it just never became an issue. Or perhaps after their experiences with the math curriculum parents decided that they didn't want to go through that struggle again.

Considering Parents' Attitudes: Another Way

Parents' attitudes about new instructional practices influence--either directly or indirectly--whether or not these practices are introduced and sustained whether we like it or not. The stories of the math curriculum and of the social studies curriculum introduced in Grover's Corners demonstrate this. The math teachers ignored parental concerns and created a storm of protest. Eventually changes were made--but parents and educators were left with bad feelings towards each other--undermining whatever trust and respect existed between them. While the social studies teachers were more proactive in addressing parents' concerns by making modifications based on their perceptions of what would be acceptable to those with the most influence in the community--the concerns of those with the least influence were ignored.

I argue that since parents' attitudes are important, perhaps a third way to take parents' attitudes into consideration is possible. Perhaps parents should be involved in talking about, thinking about, and learning about proposed changes prior to the full development and implementation of a new practice. While I know there are many reasons (Konzal, 1997a, 1997b) why this path will be a difficult one, I argue that in the long run it may be the most fruitful. I suggest that parents, as fully participating members of the high school community, be invited to learn with educators as new programs are considered and planned. In an environment of trust and respect--one where parents' knowledge of their children and community and educators' knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy are equally respected--parents and educators can uncover their mental models of what should go on in "good" high school classrooms and together construct new mental models of "good" instructional practices.

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